

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values inherent in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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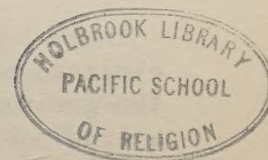
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The Rural Church's Task in War Time

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In such an hour of history as this, every institution must evaluate anew its task and must dedicate itself to a plan of vital work and of intense sacrificial service. The rural church has its especial task of meeting the spiritual needs of rural America and of creating therein positive faith and strong morale. And by the rural church is meant not the ministry and church members but all those who believe that God's resources, as revealed in Christ, are the answer to the needs of the world. The idealism of yesterday is becoming the realism of today.

First, the rural church must keep strong in the lives of the farmers and their fine families the deep consciousness of the dignity and strategic importance of their agricultural labor and of their way of life—a way of life that has ever been the foundation stone of civilization.

Mankind has built throughout the centuries impressive and even dazzling civilizations which have, sooner or later, been blasted away through their own sin and the devastating destruction of their wars. It is interesting to note that nothing that man has ever been able to build has been able to survive the onslaughts of his fury. But no gun has ever been able to blast the seeds of the soil high enough to be lost on the winds of the heavens. No bomb has ever been able to bury the seeds of the soil deep enough to be lost in the depths of the sea or in the cavernous recesses of the earth. Not with flame and fury do the seeds of God "burst their dry sheathings in twain" but with a silent, mysterious push of growing things comes our daily bread. Always a remnant of mankind, with their soil and their seeds, has been used by God as the foundation for a new order—for the ongoing of civilization.

It is fortunate for the world that, in the midst of war, mothers still quietly sing lullabies to their newborn babes. It is God's plan, not man's, that, in the midst of war, men must nurture the silent processes of nature's

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growth and watch embedded seeds open without wreckage or destruction "to bring forth first the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear." No roar of guns nor widespread ruin stops God's goodness, as revealed in Jesus' words, "When the fruit is brought forth immediately he putteth in the sickle because the harvest is come." A person must be clear in his thinking and grounded in spiritual values to want to remain a worker with these silent, mysterious and creative processes of life, when it is to the fighting forces and defense workers of the nation that go all the glory and acclaim.

A mother who has gone through the valley of suffering and holds close to her heart her little child will be given no special decoration by the government and will have no particular mention in the press. But she is a true patriot just the same and a brave one. So it is with the farmers of our land. Statesmen may say that the farmers' work is the lifeline for the marching, sailing, soaring forces of the nation. Internationalists may proclaim that the just distribution of the resources of God's holy earth is the only foundation for permanent peace. The fact remains, however, that the farmers are outside the arena of deadly conflict. Extra crops are not heralded with the same degree of enthusiasm by the average American citizen, who knows little about famine and who is still able to obtain three square meals a day, as are the unprecedented gains in the production of munitions, airplanes and ships. Gradually, however, the rationing of food is bringing to the attention of every American the importance of agriculture in sustaining the life of today and the civilization of the future.

The Christian church, however, must do more than exalt agriculture as the economic foundation stone of our democracy. It must sanctify, for the rural population, the weeks and the months of incessant toil and serious emergencies that lie ahead of them in the years to come. It must lead men and women back to a study of the New Testament with its startling message of divine power for the sowers of the seed. It must bring them into the presence of "the Supreme Lord of the Harvest."

The rural church must persuade men with a gracious appeal of their immediate needs for God's divine guidance and for the peace that passeth understanding in a day of peril. It must demonstrate that the spiritual laws lived by Jesus do bring to men and women divine resources and increases from a living God even as the laws of nature, when obeyed, do bring substantial increases and harvests from the soil. In farmers everywhere must be created the spirit of the young Canadian who was accosted, while milking a cow, by a misguided woman patriot. She indignantly put the question, "Young man, why are you not at the front?" Continuing to augment the milk supply of his nation, the farmer quietly replied, "Because, madam, the milk does not come from that end." The rural church will have fulfilled one of its unique functions if it emphasizes that the farmers' end is determinative and strategic in national and international economy and in the lasting, spiritual values of life.

The second function of the rural church is to protect, teach and inspire the minds of little children of rural America. The preponderance of the childhood of our democracy lies within the borders of our countryside. In rural America the crops of children are more bountiful than in any other area. The religious nurture of the nation's little children cannot be neglected without dire peril for the future.

would regain its prestige and power only when the Christian forces in rural New England unified their efforts to gain strength in rebuilding a Christian rural civilization.

We were told that rural New England was not ready for the promotion of interdenominational work. However, the community parishes and larger parishes throughout New England are living witnesses to the success of the efforts of this group. This group is an illustration of the leadership that has existed in small units in all parts of America.

Here in New England, also, is an unusual group of lay men and women, government officials, ministers and denominational executives whose dedication to church unity is effective and inspiring. However, it represents but a small minority. Conditions as they exist in New England and, to a greater extent, in other parts of the United States are to be deeply regretted and I am convinced that the time has come, in this day of penitence, when a crusade should be initiated by the leaders of today to remove the obstacles in the path of unity.

The reason that New England is an especially fertile field for the growth of church unity is because 72 per cent of all the rural churches are either Methodist, Baptist or Congregational. In these churches the differences are so slight, in comparison with the differences in the cultures, beliefs and needs of the nations of the world that one cannot believe that the progress for unity could have been so slow and the efforts for united work so constantly defeated. There are hundreds of villages here and throughout the entire United States where there are only people enough and money enough for one church. These communities have for years constituted an immediate challenge for united action on the part of the denominations--a challenge that has been very inadequately met. If the churches cannot come together in these places, there will be in the future, as there has been in the past, no adequate Christian leadership and no far-reaching religious activities which can lift and Christianize the life of these rural communities. They will become the seedbeds of paganism, other "isms" and of dogmatic sects in the future.

Already, the failure of the leading denominations to unite in these overchurched communities has resulted in competitive church groups so busy with the raising of their several budgets that first emphasis is not placed upon the need for the development of the spiritual life of the community. When two or more churches and two or more ministers must be maintained in a rural village, where there are only people and money enough to sustain one, inevitably the evangelizing power that could be engendered in a spiritually strong united church is quenched. The surrounding countrysides suffer in consequence as is witnessed by the fact that, at present, approximately 200,000 children in rural New England are without contact with a church or Sunday school.

In fact, the denominations are not using or welcoming into their midst in any large way, the interdenominational prophets and leaders who could interpret for their people the sins of Christian disunity. The more exclusive a denomination is in its membership and ministry, the more carefully are inspiring speakers chosen from their own constituency and the more rigid is their control over any new interpretation of the place and duty of the church.

One large denomination in New England will not join a state council

The leaders of the world who gather around the peace table after this fearful agony is over will be realistic statesmen and politicians. The question will be asked by them, "What groups of people, with distinct differences of mind and culture and with conflicting ways of life, can prove to us how to get along together in genuine trust? What groups have worked through the solution of their conflicting needs, with courtesy, justice and mercy?" The hope of every Christian naturally would be that the answer to these questions and that the living demonstration of unity might be given by the Christian church. But every Christian must, at this moment, realize that it will be too late, when the peace table becomes an actuality, for any groups of people or institutions to ask for consideration of their way of life, if that way of life has not been consistently lived and proven by their actions of the past. As the Christian church's unity is on trial as never before under the pressure of a divided warring world, so time is short for repudiation of our sins of the past.

As one who has spent her life in the Christian ministry, in interdenominational work and in the promotion of church unity, and as a delegate to the Madras Ecumenical Conference in India in 1938, I am fully aware of the amazing gains in ecumenicity that have been made in the past twenty-five years. Many books have been and could be written about those gains. In this article I would not minimize one of them. Christians must be honest enough, however, to recognize the true situation. In spite of the continuing progress toward church unity, the actual achievements of unbroken and centralized fellowship are not impressive in the light of the revolutionary needs of today.

If the federation of nations, that everyone knows must be created in order to preserve mankind in the ways of peace, is vested with no more power for the development of world brotherhood than the denominations in the United States of America have delegated to their overhead Federal Council of the Churches of Christ, there will be little hope for a lasting, universal peace. If, in drawing up our constitution, the colonies had delegated to the federal government no more authority for the control of the nation's interests than the denominations have delegated to the Federal Council of Churches and the Home Missions Council, no demonstration of national unity such as we are witnessing today could have been possible.

Various areas of America differ in their denominational problems but in facing the sins of disunity, New England is an interesting area to study. It has taken the lead in the number of notable and spiritually effective federations, community churches and larger parishes. Also, here were the beginnings of the whole movement for councils of churches, several of which are among the most effective today. In this area is the only inter-seminary, interdenominational commission in the United States for the training of the rural ministry and the only effective regional commission, the New England Town and Country Church Commission, for the promotion of a united rural church. Much of this achievement is due to that pioneer group of rural, interdenominationally-minded statesmen who fifteen years ago came together to form the New England Town and Country Church Commission. There are but few persons interested in rural New England who do not know of the works of John Sherley, Kenyon L. Butterfield, E. Tallmadge Root, Malcolm Dana, Eugene Richards, Wilbur Bull, Kenneth MacArthur and other outstanding rural leaders. As it is clear to us today that unity is essential in the gigantic task that America has undertaken, so was it clear to that group that the rural church

As the mother of a son who has served sixteen months overseas, I often try to evaluate the things that would keep faith with the sacrifices he is making for the country he loves. Many activities are immediately barred. However, all work that assures him that the little children of our republic are being given the opportunity for education and spiritual training--the same advantages that he enjoyed--will be keeping faith with him. For our boys overseas to know that childhood at home is being protected, reinforced and sensitized to God will give to their services an added meaning, for nothing could be more shortsighted than to assume that a civilization can endure by the triumph of armed forces alone.

Democracy, God grant, may be saved by this generation, but it must be perpetuated in the paths of peace by the next generation and the generations to come. What happens right now to little children of tender and impressionable age is determining the future of our beloved republic twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years from now. For there are just a few short years, from one to ten, when the mind and the spirit of a little child are acutely sensitive to truth, to beauty and to God. In this time their contacts with the sordid world are relatively limited, and the spontaneous receptivity and adventurous imagination of the child can receive spiritual truth as naturally as their bodies receive the sunlight. In these years, also, companionship with an unseen presence can easily become a reality. Such a definite religious experience often does not come if spiritual communion is delayed until adolescent and self-conscious youth have developed pride of opinion or have become absorbed in material things and in social life. In early years it can be second nature for a little child to want to do what Jesus did, to think what Jesus thought, to love those whom Jesus loved, and to serve as Jesus served.

It may be simplifying the task but it seems wholly reasonable to say that the problem of establishing a just and a durable peace can only be solved by those who have made commitments to the Kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. For the spirit of Jesus would establish the peace that is just and the peace that is merciful, and they together will constitute the only peace that is lasting. The emphasis of Jesus was upon those things that endure and that are one with the eternal mind, purpose and love of God. Jesus' way of life would create the actual brotherhood of man. So the rural church must emphasize the fact that no program will be adequate that does not reach every child in village and in town, along lonely cross-roads and isolated countrysides with the effective and transforming influences of religious activities. Such a potential bulwark of democracy could be immeasurable in its worth. In order that the sacrifices of our gallant and heroic boys will not be nullified, and that the future of the country for which they are prepared to die will not be jeopardized, this work must go forward unceasingly.

The third function of the rural church is to promote church unity so convincingly that immediate reorganizations of the rural churches for unified and cooperative fellowship will result. This spiritual amalgamation will ensue only when Christians have been aroused to the imperative demand for church unity by the conviction that it is the only honest basis on which religion can speak to a warring world for peace. In this day of crisis, unity is the watchword of the hour.

of churches although no demand is made by that council for change in its organization, creed or rites of worship, neither is any financial commitment required. Another state council is a skeleton without executives and with no amount of money which could be considered as a working budget. In each case a meagre amount of money is appropriated from denominational budgets for the work of the interdenominational agencies and church councils. The work is thus carried on without the wholehearted support of the majority of Christians.

To the successful rural federations, community churches and union churches there is not given, by the majority of denominational executives, the same interest, nurture and careful planning as is given to the denominational churches. In fact, in some denominations, ministers are the losers in their denominational standing if they choose to serve and promote such interdenominational churches. Several outstanding denominational executives publicly belittle the actual attempts to promote church unity. They emphasize apparent weaknesses, but give no challenging program for these churches which must unite. Consecrated ministers are excluded from the administration of the Holy Communion at the altars of other ministers who claim for themselves a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Devout, wonderful Christians are refused membership in churches of denominations other than their own. Some churches refuse to give letters of membership which would make it possible for their members to be received in the membership of another communion, even though, in the communities to which these people go, there is but one church which they might join. Many denominational executives demonstrate a real jealousy for their authority and do not plan and work harmoniously with other groups of Christians in cooperative work and planning. Some of poor spirit even resent the statement of such facts as are here presented.

The tragedy of the divisions in the Church of Christ, two hundred and fifty separately incorporated denominations, must ever be a heartache at the center of our Christian consciousness. This fact of divisions where there should be unity may well be the one obstruction to our receiving the power to become a victorious church. The most tragic evidence of the sins of disunity is the fact that all Christians today will not come into the very presence of their Lord together to break bread and to take the cup in remembrance of Him, to be cleansed by His spirit and to be made one by His divine love. Recently many Christians over the world declared their unity by simultaneous communion services in their separate churches. In many places a united community communion would have been utterly impossible. To most honest Christians, it is impossible as yet to employ the sacraments as a sign of unity when the very way in which we observe it so often advertises our dividedness.

Our country churches are closer to this problem than are any others. May they not, for that reason, take the lead toward the solution of the problem? Rural America can, at this instant, mobilize its leaders, for it has thousands of them, and start on an immediate crusade to challenge the fine rural people of our land to bring about a United Rural Church of America.

The time has come when competitive religion must cease to obstruct the forward march toward the united Christian front. If all the Christian forces of America united, their impact upon the new order, which is emerging from this world upheaval, might well be the determining factor in its direction. The Christian religion is being stamped out in large areas of the world--or so the dictators believe. It is my conviction that those tillers of the soil whose lives are bound up in the good earth and the goodness of God as He gives that earth its increase, can never be deluded into giving up spiritual values for the counterfeit of totalitarianism. May the rural church be awakened to its supreme opportunity of fulfilling the prayer of Christ for His followers, "that they all may be one."